"Political Masculinity: How Incels, Fundamentalists and Authoritarians Mobilise for Patriarchy" by Susanne Kaiser (review)

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Book Review

Review of "Political Masculinity: How Incels, Fundamentalists and Authoritarians Mobilise for Patriarchy"

By Susanne Kaiser
Polity Press, 2022, 220 pages. *https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Political+Masculinity%3A+How+Incels%2C+Fundamentalists+and+Authoritarians+Mobilise+for+Patriarchy-p-9781509550814*, .

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"The feeling of no longer having control in the modern world is," Susanne Kaiser writes in the conclusion of *Political Masculinity*, "a gendered feeling" (200). This declaration comes in the wake of a comprehensive treatise on the relationship between misogyny and contemporary authoritarianism, wherein Kaiser develops a strong account of how seemingly disparate groups, including "incels and masculinists; conservatives, right-wing populists and right-wing extremists; and religious hardliners and fundamentalists" (7), have mobilised in defense of hegemonic masculinity and male supremacy.

It is her analysis of the role of hegemonic masculinity in these movements, and her willingness to name male supremacy for what it is, that serve as foundational strengths of her monograph. As Kaiser notes, the gendered character of the far-right (and the role of masculinity in particular) is often underemphasised. Throughout her analysis, she provides a compelling case for masculinity as a mobilising political force—one that is not simply one factor among many in contemporary authoritarian movements, but that has become "an independent form of the phenomenon itself" (200).

Others have rightly noted that misogyny is increasingly a motivator of far-right participation and even far-right violence (Di Branco 2020, 2022). Where Kaiser excels is in situating male supremacy within a broader network of transnational movements that have organised in response to threats to hegemonic masculinity, and in articulating how the politicisation of masculinity provides a common thread through which a number of groups coalesce.

In Chapter 1, she focuses on the virtual publics present within the "manosphere," a "woman-free zone on the internet" (26) defined largely by its misogyny and antifeminism. These online spaces amplify more mainstream misogynist attitudes, and allow men to develop a collective sense of victimisation that inverts actual power relations by constructing women (and feminism) as oppressors, and men as oppressed. Claims of inversive sexism are not new to reactionary movements or even to more mainstream thinking (see Carian 2022); what is new, Kaiser suggests, is how these spaces have created potential for interpersonal violence to transcend into political violence. Men's violence against women, she rightly notes, is often restorative—enacted as a means of recouping a sense of control. And, when individual men enact violence against specific women they perceive as having harmed them, these efforts fall squarely within the realm of the personal. When manosphere adherents frustrated with women as a *group* engage in restorative

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violence with the aim of challenging what they perceive to be a disadvantageous system; however, Kaiser argues such acts become squarely political.

Kaiser thus does an excellent job situating the violence perpetrated by incels and other masculinists as acts of far-right terrorism; she similarly provides a robust critique of previous work on extremism that fails to account for the gendered dynamics at play in such incidents. In Chapter 2, she further expands on the logics invoked by male supremacists to articulate how such acts of violence move beyond traditional understandings of aggrieved entitlement. Common definitions may emphasise male entitlement and violence as a way of restoring masculinity under threat. What is often left out of these discussions, she argues, "is the reactionary collective potential that is evident in recent developments. Masculinists, right-wing extremists and fundamentalists are networking together with the common authoritarian goal of subordinating women with violence" (85) as they attempt to cling to privilege and reinstitutionalise women's subordination.

A major crux of Kaiser's argument here is that masculinism is an organised response to feminist politics that render existent power relations more visible. Because hegemonic masculinity and male supremacy no longer operate invisibly (and thus unquestionably), male dominance must find new avenues through which it can be reinforced or reproduced. Masculinists and other authoritarian movements must then rely on identity politics, appropriating discourses of oppression to organise around their shared (primary white) male interests. Yet, at the same time, it is not merely enough for men to claim oppression; they must also invoke claims of innate male superiority in order to justify a sense of entitlement to the dominant social position.

Kaiser does, perhaps, overstep slightly in presenting this analysis of politicised masculinity as novel; her discussion quite aligns, for example, with previous work on the emergence of a white, male identity politic (see, e.g. Brown's 1993 work on identity, subordination, and the logics of *ressentiment*). However, her analysis offers great utility in its connections between male supremacist ideology and political mobilisation, particularly in discussing how masculinists and others draw on pseudoscience and biological essentialism to bolster claims that feminism has inverted the ideal social order. It is also here that draws strong connections between male supremacy and other far-right ideologies, such as ethnonationalism. Among authoritarians, feminism is constructed not only as oppressing men, but also as a destructive force that creates weak men and, in doing so, weakens culture by increasing vulnerability to the threats of immigration and multiculturalism.

In Chapter 3, Kaiser identifies how this broader pushback against feminism and gender equality serves as the foundational thread across authoritarian movements in Europe and the broader West. Masculinists, White nationalists, religious fundamentalists, and far-right political parties become united in their stand against what has been broadly termed "gender ideology." Definitions of gender ideology may vary slightly, but are aligned in that "claims to dominance and privilege associated with–mostly white–masculinity are fiercely defended" (127) and that groups organised against gender ideology are "intent on restoring a bygone or obsolescent social order" (127)—one that ensures women's subordination to men. Transnational movements engage in careful coordination, leveraging the relative palatability of misogyny compared to racism or ethnonationalism and moral panics to coordinate attacks on women's rights and work toward the restoration of hegemonic masculinity as a dominant force. These movements are largely comprised of, and organised around, men and masculinity specifically because economic and political forces create a lack of control and uncertainty to which men as a class are uniquely unaccustomed.

There are, certainly, areas of Kaiser's analysis that could benefit from refinement or a more critical stance. She is quite successful, for example, in interrogating work that favors "lone wolf" explanations for misogynist acts of mass violence, rather than situating them as far-right terrorism. Yet, when it comes to describing explaining hesitance to label misogynist violence as such, there seems to be an emphasis on the *newness* of organised misogyny, with no account of how less overt male supremacy undergirds social structure in ways that contributes to the endurance of mental health or lone wolf narratives. (For a strong account of how misogyny shapes

understanding of, and sympathy for, male perpetrators, see Manne 2018.) Overall, however, the breadth and nuance present in Kaiser's analysis firmly situates *Political Masculinity* as requisite reading for scholars concerned with the reshaping of hegemonic masculinity, the gendered character of the far-right, or the authoritarian turn in contemporary politics.

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